Prepared Remarks of Representative Robert J. Wittman (VA-01)
Protecting and Restoring America's Great Waters -- Part II: Chesapeake Bay
2:00 p.m., 2167 Rayburn House Office Building
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Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment

Chairwoman Johnson and Ranking Member Boozman,

Thank you for allowing me to be here today to discuss an issue important to me and my constituents, the Chesapeake Bay. I am grateful to the attention you are paying to estuary restoration with hearings on improving America's great waters. I am pleased that you have decided to focus today on the Chesapeake Bay.

I would like to take a moment to introduce myself and share with you my interest in efforts to restore the Chesapeake Bay. I'm fortunate to represent Virginia's First District which stretches from the exurbs of Washington D.C. to Hampton Roads. The First District includes many of the major tributaries of the Bay, the Potomac, Rappahannock, York and James Rivers. Just as the Bay has shaped the lives and livelihood of Virginia residents for centuries, the bay continues to be a central player in the character of the region.

As you know, I am one of the newer members elected to serve in this distinguished body. I have the honor of filling the remainder of Jo Ann Davis' term after she lost her battle with breast cancer in the fall of 2007. Jo Ann was a champion for the Chesapeake Bay and she served Virginia's First District with grace and dignity.

Although I am new to Congress, I am not new to the challenges and issues confronting the Chesapeake Bay. For the last 20 years I've served in local and state government, on the frontlines, if you will of Bay restoration activities. During my time in the Virginia General Assembly I served on the Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources Committee and for the last sixteen years my "day job" has been spent as a shellfish specialist monitoring water quality and environmental health issues in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

As the largest estuary in the United States the Chesapeake Bay watershed is home to 16 million people. The scope of the watershed is hard to imagine, the watershed encompasses six states and the District of Columbia, well over 1,000 local governments, 150 major tributaries, 100,000 streams and rivers and over 11,600 miles of shoreline, plus thousands of plant and animal species. The bay accounts for billions of dollars in economic and recreational revenue, not to mention it's the site of major ports and military bases.

In many respects we are very fortunate, the amount of research, funding and attention dedicated to restoring the Chesapeake Bay is unprecedented and unmatched in other watersheds. The level of federal, state, local and stakeholder participation is a testament

to the shared commitment to restoration and speaks to the importance of this "jewel" of an estuary. There are many successes to point to, dramatically increased numbers of striped bass, encouraging numbers of Atlantic sturgeon in the James River, increased access for shad to freely spawn up tributaries and reductions in wastewater nutrient discharges.

However, there are many sobering statistics as well. Blue crab populations are down 70% since 1990. Native oyster populations are currently at less than 1% of historical levels. Reductions in nutrient and sediment pollution are way behind schedule to meet Chesapeake 2000 agreement goals. The recent U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Office of Inspector General report highlights the many challenges still facing the Bay including land development, agricultural runoff and air pollution.

Recognizing and responding to the calls for a reevaluation of Chesapeake Bay restoration activities and goals the EPA recently completed the Chesapeake Bay Action Plan (CAP) and outlined actions taken to implement the GAO's 2005 assessment.

I want to commend and recognize the significant effort by EPA and the other federal, state and NGO partners in preparing this report to Congress. The EPA's July 2008 report to Congress outlines significant accomplishments in meeting GAO's recommendations and the Chesapeake Bay Action Plan outlines a way forward for the remaining years under the Chesapeake 2000 Agreement. The CAP makes great strides in unifying stakeholder efforts towards restoration goals. The EPA also for the first time, with coordination from state and NGO partners has created a comprehensive database of the ongoing projects within the watershed. Additionally, the rollout of "dashboards" will give everybody a common indicator to gauge the progress and status of meeting Chesapeake 2000 goals. Also, I am very encouraged that the CAP highlights the importance of adaptive management as a key component in the complex environmental restoration efforts ongoing in the Chesapeake Bay.

I would like to outline some of the key principals that I would like to encourage the Committee to consider as Congress continues to evaluate and plan for ongoing restoration activities in the Chesapeake Bay.

First, there must be performance based measures to assure that dollars currently spent on Bay restoration activities are producing results.

Before we can evaluate a programs we need to know what projects are out there. The CAP's, Activity Integration Plan is a key step in organizing restoration activities into one database. Before now, its has been difficult, if not impossible to have a complete list of ongoing restoration activities. However, as I understand it, this database, at least in the initial phase, will not be publicly accessible. I would suggest that a comprehensive accounting of all Bay restoration activities available to everyone, including Congressional oversight committees, appropriators, and stakeholders should be an important component going forward in order to ensure program effectiveness.

The next step is to evaluate program success in meeting goals and effective implementation. For complex environmental restoration activities, like the Chesapeake Bay, adaptive management is a very useful tool to meet the scientific, policy and management challenges encountered in the Chesapeake. I am encouraged that the CAP includes a significant adaptive management component. I believe that this Committee and all partners should embrace an active adaptive management component for Bay restoration activities to ensure the best management outcomes with finite financial resources.

Accounting and adaptive management are vital in my mind as key components for any complex environmental restoration project, especially the Chesapeake Bay. I have drafted legislation that I will introduce this week. My legislation would implement a crosscut budgeting requirement for Chesapeake Bay restoration activities. Crosscut budgets are an accounting process that has recently been enacted for Great Lakes, Everglades and California Bay Delta restoration activates. Crosscut budgets can be important tools that foster accountability and are useful in measuring progress and assessing program effectiveness.

My legislation would also require the EPA to implement an active adaptive management plan to guide restoration activates in the Chesapeake Bay watershed with an eye towards results and effectiveness. My goal would be to build on the initial steps EPA has outlined in the CAP.

Secondly, I would like to highlight the importance of waterfowl species and efforts to restore wetlands within the Chesapeake Bay watershed. As an avid waterfowler and life member of Ducks Unlimited I am particularly interested in restoring quality habitat for waterfowl. The Bay has a rich heritage of plentiful waterfowl, however changing land use patterns and degraded water quality have negatively impacted prime wintering habitat. Chesapeake 2000, rightly emphasized wetlands restoration activities as a key goal. Ducks Unlimited and other non-profit organizations are vital partners in efforts to clean up the Bay and protect habitat. DU along with federal, state and local partners have made significant progress in meeting wetlands restoration goals. I support continued federal support for wetlands restoration and encourage this committee to continue its support for wetlands restoration as a key component of Chesapeake Bay restoration activities.

Finally, both commercial and sport fishing industries are suffering from poor water quality in the Bay. By cleaning up the Bay we can increase the oysters, crabs and fish available to both commercial and sport fisherman. Waterman and fisherman contribute to local economies and these men and women also represent an important part of the heritage of the Bay. We must make sure this way of life does not fade into history.

Thank you again Chairwoman Johnson and Ranking Member Boozeman for allowing me to testify today. I stand ready and willing to support and work with you to continue efforts to restore the Chesapeake Bay.